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Why the Classroom Is a Sacred Place for Me and Why I'll Keep Venturing Out into "No-Man's land"... Even during These Abortion Wars

by Rose Holz

I'll never forget the day. I was walking across campus towards my office in the Women's and Gender Studies program, when I heard somebody excitedly calling out from behind me. "Dr. Holz, Dr. Holz," some guy was shouting as he came running down the sidewalk towards me. "I've been meaning to get a hold of you for some time now, and here you are."

As was typical for me, I had no idea what his name was, but I did remember his face. He had taken one of my U.S. history survey classes several years back. He sat near the front, on the left side, and was always eager to participate in whatever discussion I hoped to drum up in those anonymous lecture-hall settings. I remembered liking him. He talked—and seemed genuinely interested in history.

As we chatted outside my building, he filled me in on his name and all that had happened in his life since he took my class. He had graduated, gotten married, and started a family. He had also gotten his master's degree in theology and was now a lay Catholic missionary at the university's Newman Center. And this is why he wanted to talk to me. "We Catholics talk a lot about birth control," he said to me, "but it occurred to me that I know nothing about its history." And this was where I fit into the story. Apparently I had mentioned my interest in the subject in the class he took with me (maybe even mentioned a few birth control laws), and for whatever reason he remembered.

And so, we talked—outside my office for a while and then inside my office for even longer, whereupon in a fit of exasperation of trying to explain what I spend weeks covering in my upper division history of sexuality class, I told him he should just sit in on the class. He would, I insisted however, have to abide by a few rules: not only would he have to stay for the duration of the semester, but he would also have to participate as a full-fledged member. In other words, he would be expected to share his thoughts in our discussions, thoughts which I knew were thoroughly anti-birth control and thoroughly pro-life.

He accepted my offer.

And thus began my agony in the days, weeks, months leading up to the new semester: "dear god," I thought. "What have I done?"

Of course, I've always prided myself in teaching in a way that allows for diversity of opinion. The classroom, as I see it, is not a place where I impose my views. It is a place for the free exchange of ideas even—no, especially—if they differ from my own. Otherwise, how else are we going to learn? Otherwise, how else are we going to get to know each other—maybe even like each other—even if sometimes we hold radically different views? And of course again, I would be lying if I didn't mention just how many times I've miserably failed in this regard. But I'm also happy to report how over the years I've managed to achieve a few moments of success, in particular when facilitating conversations about abortion.

The cornerstone to my approach is Leslie Reagan's [When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867–1973](#). If you haven't read it, you should. It is, hands down, the best book on the subject, and students are fascinated to discover just how little they know about an issue everybody talks and has a strong opinion about, despite how little most people know about its history. Thus, each semester Reagan's book is required and each semester students must do a take-home exam. We then spend two days discussing what we've learned.

But first I lay down a few ground rules. When writing their exams, I tell the students that they are to keep their politics out of their answers. As I explain, "I don't care if you're pro-choice or pro-life. Your job is to stick with learning about what happened in the past." Easier said than done, however, particularly once the conversation begins. Thus the creation last spring of another helpful ground rule. Sensing how high the students' emotions were running already, I came to class on our first abortion discussion day armed with a Zip-lock food storage container and little slips of white paper. "Write your position on abortion down here, on this little piece of paper," I told them. "And if it makes you feel better, feel free to surround your position with exclamation points, as many exclamation points as you feel the need to announce." But then, as I further instructed them, "you are to put that little piece of paper into this Zip-lock box. And this Zip-lock box is going to sit up front—with me and all my stuff—for the duration of the class."

It worked like a charm.

This is not to say that *When Abortion Was a Crime* lacks a political message; it is clearly pro-choice, a conclusion I let the students discover on their own. And most do. But this prompts another interesting question for us to debate: how would a solidly researched historical account of the same subject read if the author were pro-life? Very quickly we then find ourselves eyeball deep in my favorite

historical themes about subjectivity, objectivity, historiography, and evidence. Yes, these days, especially about evidence.

Admittedly, this is probably where *my* politics can no longer be contained and where my pro-choice position shines through most visibly. As I climb atop my soapbox, I find myself ranting about history's two most basic rules: first, you have to ground yourself in the evidence and, second, no fair sweeping away evidence you don't like simply because it doesn't mesh well with the story you want to tell. Admittedly again, it's also usually at this point when the never-quite-ex-Catholic in me beseeches their forgiveness, which they usually grant, and we move on—until abortion comes up again later on in the semester.

But still, there's just something about all this pro-life Catholic stuff that dogs me (blame twelve years of Catholic school education, I suppose), prompting me to ask questions I have no idea why I'm asking and to seek out intellectual conversations with people whom I know to hold deeply Catholic pro-life views. Which is where my story about the missionary student resumes. Indeed, what happened in the semester he sat in on my class? Truthfully, despite my worries, nothing. There were no explosions, no heated exchanges. It all went rather smoothly. Maybe it was a testament to my methods. But mostly, when I'm being really honest with myself, I know it was a product of our desire, our shared desire, to engage in dialog—not war.

And thus what has since become a rather interesting friendship, indeed a rather unusual collaboration, which has enriched my teaching as well as my scholarship. So, while he sat in on my class, I've visited with his missionaries-in-training. While he's read books I've recommended, I've read books recommended by him. Long story short on that front: two thumbs up from me for Pope Francis' [Joy of the Gospel!](#), two thumbs up from him for Alice Dreger's [Galileo's Middle Finger](#), and as to Peter Kreeft's [Three Approaches to Abortion](#)... well, the less I say about that book the better. He's also made invaluable contributions to my latest research project on the 1939 [Dickinson-Belskie Birth Series sculptures](#), a story which I hope will soon be publically available.

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Of course, having said all this, I would be lying again if I didn't admit to the occasional muttering about Catholics in the wake of our conversations. But, for whatever reason, I'm always up for another exchange. Call me a masochist, I guess.

Perhaps the best way to end this essay is to address a question that some of you may already be asking. Do I think we will ever change each other's minds about

abortion? Truthfully, I sincerely doubt it. But that's okay. It's the tension of our differences that serves as the creative spark, the spark necessary to forge new conversations, to forge new truces. Indeed, at least now I better understand why he holds the views he does—and I can only hope he feels the same way. I guess ultimately what I'm trying to say is this: apparently, there's just something about this particular "no-man's land" that intrigues me. (I'll leave him to offer the Catholic explanation for what he's getting out of it all.) But in an age when abortion politics tends to be waged as trench warfare, it fills me with great relief to know that when I decided to climb atop the weapons buried deep in the mud and gingerly drag my body out upon the unknown and unprotected surface, there was somebody on the other side who had chosen to do the same.

Author

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